Chapter Twenty

Lady Walderhurst's departure from Palstrey, though unexpected, had been calm and matter-of-fact. All the Osborns knew was that she had been obliged to go up to London for a day or two, and that when there, her physician had advised certain German baths. Her letter of explanation and apology was very nice. She could not return to the country before beginning her journey. It seemed probable that she would return with her husband, who might arrive in England during the next two months.

"Has she heard that he is coming back?" Captain Osborn asked his wife.

"She has written to ask him to come."

Osborn grinned.

"He will be obliged to her. He is tremendously pleased with his importance at this particular time, and he is just the sort of man--as we both know--to be delighted at being called back to preside over an affair which is usually a matter for old women."

But the letter he had examined, as it lay with the rest awaiting postal, he had taken charge of himself. He knew that one, at least, would not reach Lord Walderhurst. Having heard in time of the broken bridge-rail, he had been astute enough to guess that the letter written immediately

after the incident might convey such impressions as might lead even his lordship to feel that it would be well for him to be at home. The woman had been frightened, and would be sure to lose her head and play the fool. In a few days she would calm down and the affair would assume smaller proportions. At any rate, he had chosen to take charge of this particular letter.

What he did not know, however, was that chance had played into his hands in the matter of temporarily upsetting Lord Walderhurst's rather unreliable digestion, and in altering his plans, by a smart, though not dangerous, attack of fever which had ended in his being ordered to a part of the hill country not faithfully reached by letters; as a result of which several communications from his wife went astray and were unduly delayed. At the time Captain Osborn was discussing him with Hester, he was taking annoyed care of himself with the aid of a doctor, irritated by the untoward disturbance of his arrangements, and giving, it is true, comparatively little thought to his wife, who, being comfortably installed at Palstrey Manor, was doubtless enjoyably absorbed in little Mrs. Osborn.

"What German baths does she intend going to?" Alec Osborn inquired.

Hester consulted the letter with a manner denoting but languid interest.

"It's rather like her that she doesn't go to the length of explaining," was her reply. "She has a way of telling you a great many things you

don't care to know, and forgetting to mention those you are interested in. She is very detailed about her health, and her affection and mine. She evidently expects us to go back to The Kennel Farm, and deplores her inhospitality, with adjectives."

She did not look as if she was playing a part; but she was playing one, and doing it well. Her little way was that of a nasty-tempered, self-centred woman, made spiteful by being called upon to leave a place which suited her.

"You are not really any fonder of her than I am," commented Osborn, after regarding her speculatively a few moments. If he had been as sure of her as he had been of Ameerah--!

"I don't know of any reason for my being particularly fond of her," she said. "It's easy enough for a rich woman to be good-natured. It doesn't cost her enough to constitute a claim."

Osborn helped himself to a stiff whiskey and soda. They went back to The Kennel Farm the next day, and though it was his habit to consume a large number of "pegs" daily, the habit increased until there were not many hours in the day when he was normally sure of what he was doing.

The German baths to which Lady Walderhurst had gone were nearer to Palstrey than any one knew. They were only at a few hours' distance by rail.

When, after a day spent in a quiet London lodging, Mrs. Cupp returned to her mistress with the information that she had been to the house in Mortimer Street and found that the widow who had bought the lease and furniture was worn out with ill-luck and the uncertainty of lodgers, and only longed for release which was not ruin, Emily cried a little for joy.

"Oh, how I should like to be there!" she said. "It was such a dear house. No one would ever dream of my being in it. And I need have no one but you and Jane. I should be so safe and quiet. Tell her you have a friend who will take it, as it is, for a year, and pay her anything."

"I won't tell her quite that, my lady," Mrs. Cupp made sagacious answer. "I'll make her an offer in ready money down, and no questions asked by either of us. People in her position sometimes gets a sudden let that pays them better than lodgers. All classes has their troubles, and sometimes a decent house is wanted for a few months, where money can be paid. I'll make her an offer."

The outcome of which was that the widowed householder walked out of her domicile the next morning with a heavier purse and a lighter mind than she had known for many months. The same night, ingenuously oblivious of having been called upon to fill the role of a lady in genteel "trouble," good and decorous Emily Walderhurst arrived under the cover of discreet darkness in a cab, and when she found herself in the "best bedroom,"

which had once been so far beyond her means, she cried a little for joy again, because the four dull walls, the mahogany dressing-table, and ugly frilled pincushions looked so unmelodramatically normal and safe.

"It seems so home-like," she said; adding courageously, "it is a very comfortable place, really."

"We can make it much more cheerful, my lady," Jane said, with grateful appreciation. "And the relief makes it like Paradise." She was leaving the room and stopped at the door. "There's not a person, black or white, can get across the door-mat, past mother and me, until his lordship comes," she allowed herself the privilege of adding.

Emily felt a little nervous when she pictured to herself Lord Walderhurst crossing the door-mat of a house in Mortimer Street in search of his Marchioness. She had not yet had time to tell him the story of the episode of the glass of milk and Hester Osborn's sudden outburst. Every moment had been given to carefully managed arrangement for the journey which was to seem so natural. Hester's cleverness had suggested every step and had supported her throughout. But for Hester she was afraid she might have betrayed herself. There had been no time for writing. But when James received her letter (of late she had more than once thought of him as "James"), he would know the one thing that was important. And she had asked him to come to her. She had apologised for suggesting any alteration of his plans, but she had really asked him to come to her.

"I think he will come," she said to herself. "I do think he will. I shall be so glad. Perhaps I have not been sensible, perhaps I have not done the best thing, but if I keep myself safe until he comes back, that really seems what is most important."

Two or three days in the familiar rooms, attended only by the two friendly creatures she knew so well, seemed to restore the balance of life for her. Existence became comfortable and prosaic again. The best bedroom and the room in which she spent her days were made quite cheerful through Jane's enterprise and memories of the appointments of Palstrey. Jane brought her tea in the morning, Mrs. Cupp presided over the kitchen. The agreeable doctor, whose reputation they had heard so much of, came and went, leaving his patient feeling that she might establish a friendship. He looked so clever and so kind.

She began to smile her childlike smile again. Mrs. Cupp and Jane told each other in private that if she had not been a married lady, they would have felt that she was Miss Fox-Seton again. She looked so like herself, with her fresh colour and her nice, cheerful eyes. And yet to think of the changes there had been, and what they had gone through!

People in London know nothing--or everything--of their neighbours. The people who lived in Mortimer Street were of the hard-worked lodging-house keeping class, and had too many anxieties connected with butcher's bills, rent, and taxes, to be able to give much time to their

neighbours. The life in the house which had changed hands had nothing noticeable about it. It looked from the outside as it had always looked. The door-steps were kept clean, milk was taken in twice a day, and local tradesmen's carts left things in the ordinary manner. A doctor occasionally called to see someone, and the only person who had inquired about the patient (she was a friendly creature, who met Mrs. Cupp at the grocer's, and exchanged a few neighbourly words) was told that ladies who lived in furnished apartments, and had nothing to do, seemed to find an interest in seeing a doctor about things working-women had no time to bother about. Mrs. Cupp's view seemed to be that doctor's visits and medicine bottles furnished entertainment. Mrs. Jameson had "as good a colour and as good an appetite as you or me," but she was one who "thought she caught cold easy," and she was "afraid of fresh air."

Dr. Warren's interest in the Extraordinary Case increased at each visit he made. He did not see the ruby ring again. When he had left the house after his first call, Mrs. Cupp had called Lady Walderhurst's attention to the fact that the ring was on her hand, and could not be considered compatible with even a first floor front in Mortimer Street. Emily had been frightened and had removed it.

"But the thing that upsets me when I hand him in," Jane said to her mother anxiously in private, "is the way she can't help looking. You know what I mean, mother,--her nice, free, good look. And we never could talk to her about it. We should have to let her know that it's more than likely he thinks she's just what she isn't. It makes me mad to

think of it. But as it had to be, if she only looked a little awkward, or not such a lady, or a bit uppish and fretful, she would seem so much more real. And then there's another thing. You know she always did carry her head well, even when she was nothing but poor Miss Fox-Seton tramping about shopping with muddy feet. And now, having been a marchioness till she's got used to it, and knowing that she is one, gives her an innocent, stately look sometimes. It's a thing she doesn't know of herself, but I do declare that sometimes as she's sat there talking just as sweet as could be, I've felt as if I ought to say, 'Oh! if you please, my lady, if you could look not quite so much as if you'd got on a tiara.'"

"Ah!" and Mrs. Cupp shook her head, "but that's what her Maker did for her. She was born just what she looks, and she looks just what she was born,--a respectable female."

Whereby Dr. Warren continued to feel himself baffled.

"She only goes out for exercise after dark, Mary," he said. "Also in the course of conversation I have discovered that she believes every word of the Bible literally, and would be alarmed if one could not accept the Athanasian Creed. She is rather wounded and puzzled by the curses it contains, but she feels sure that it would be wrong to question anything in the Church Service. Her extraordinariness is wholly her incompatibleness."

Gradually they had established the friendship Emily had thought possible. Once or twice Dr. Warren took tea with her. Her unabashed and accustomed readiness of hospitality was as incompatible with her circumstances as all the rest. She had the ease of a woman who had amiably poured out tea for afternoon callers all her life. Women who were uncertain of themselves were not amiably at ease with small social amenities. Her ingenuous talk and her fervent italics were an absolute delight to the man who was studying her. He, too, had noticed the carriage of her head Jane Cupp had deplored.

"I should say she was well born," he commented to his wife. "She holds herself as no common woman could."

"Ah! I haven't a doubt that she is well born, poor soul."

"No, not 'poor soul.' No woman who is as happy as she is needs pity. Since she has had time to rest, she looks radiant."

In course of time, however, she was less radiant. Most people know something of waiting for answers to letters written to foreign lands. It seems impossible to calculate correctly as to what length of time must elapse before the reply to the letter one sent by the last mail can reach one. He who waits is always premature in the calculation he makes. The mail should be due at a certain date, one is so sure. The letter could be written on such a day and posted at once. But the date calculated for arrives, passes,--the answer has not come. Who does not

remember?

Emily Walderhurst had passed through the experience and knew it well. But previously the letters she had sent had been of less vital importance. When the replies to them had lingered on their way she had, it is true, watched eagerly ', for the postman, and had lived restlessly between the arrivals of the mails, but she had taught herself resignation to the inevitable. Now life had altered its aspect and its significance. She had tried, with the aid of an untried imagination, to paint to herself the moments in which her husband would read the letter which told him what she had told. She had wondered if he would start, if he would look amazed, if his grey-brown eyes would light with pleasure! Might he not want to see her? Might he not perhaps write at once? She never could advance farther in her imagined reading of this reply than the first lines:

"MY DEAR EMILY,--The unexpected good news your letter contains has given
me the greatest satisfaction. You do not perhaps know how strong my desire has been--"

She used to sit and flush with happiness when she reached this point. She so wished that she was capable of depicting to herself what the rest would be.

She calculated with the utmost care the probable date of the epistle's

arrival. She thought she made sure of allowing plenty of time for all possible delays. The safety of her letters she had managed, with Hester's aid, to arrange for. They were forwarded to her bankers and called for. Only the letters from India were of any importance, and they were not frequent. She told herself that she must be even more than usually patient this time. When the letter arrived, if he told her he felt it proper that he should return, no part of the strange experience she had passed through would be of moment. When she saw his decorous, well-bred face and heard his correctly modulated voice, all else would seem like an unnatural dream.

In her relief at the decent composure of the first floor front in Mortimer Street the days did not seem at first to pass slowly. But as the date she had counted on drew near she could not restrain a natural restlessness. She looked at the clock and walked up and down the room a good deal. She was also very glad when night came and she could go to bed. Then she was glad when the morning arrived, because she was a day nearer to the end.

On a certain evening Dr. Warren said to his wife, "She is not so well to-day. When I called I found her looking pale and anxious. When I commented on the fact and asked how she was, she said that she had had a disappointment. She had been expecting an important letter by a mail arriving yesterday, and it had not come. She was evidently in low spirits."

"Perhaps she has kept up her spirits before because she believed the letter would come," Mrs. Warren speculated.

"She has certainly believed it would come."

"Do you think it will, Harold?"

"She thinks it will yet. She was pathetically anxious not to be impatient. She said she knew there were so many reasons for delay when people were in foreign countries and very much occupied."

"There are many reasons, I daresay," said Mrs. Warren with a touch of bitterness," but they are not usually the ones given to waiting, desperate women."

Dr. Warren stood upon the hearthrug and gazed into the fire, knitting his brows.

"She wanted to tell or ask me something this afternoon," he said, "but she was afraid. She looked like a good child in great trouble. I think she will speak before long."

She looked more and more like a good child in trouble as time passed. Mail after mail came in, and she received no letter. She did not understand, and her fresh colour died away. She spent her time now in inventing reasons for the non-arrival of her letter. None of them

comprised explanations which could be disparaging in any sense to Walderhurst. Chiefly she clung to the fact that he had not been well. Anything could be considered a reason for neglecting letter writing if a man was not well. If his illness had become serious she would, of course, have heard from his doctor. She would not allow herself to contemplate that. But if he was languid and feverish, he might so easily put off writing from day to day. This was all the more plausible as a reason, since he had not been a profuse correspondent. He had only written when he had found he had leisure, with decent irregularity, so to speak.

At last, however, on a day when she had felt the strain of waiting greater than she had courage for, and had counted every moment of the hour which must elapse before Jane could return from her mission of inquiry, as she rested on the sofa she heard the girl mount the stairs with a step whose hastened lightness wakened in her an excited hopefulness.

She sat up with brightened face and eager eyes. How foolish she had been to fret. Now--now everything would be different. Ah! how thankful she was to God for being so good to her!

"I think you must have a letter, Jane," she said the moment the door opened. "I felt it when I heard your footstep."

Jane was touching in her glow of relief and affection.

"Yes, my lady, I have, indeed. And they said at the bank that it had come by a steamer that was delayed by bad weather."

Emily took the letter. Her hand shook, but it was with pleasure. She forgot Jane, and actually kissed the envelope before she opened it. It looked like a beautiful, long letter. It was quite thick.

But when she had opened it, she saw that the letter itself was not very long. Several extra sheets of notes or instructions, it did not matter what, seemed to be enclosed. Her hand shook so that she let them fall on the floor. She looked so agitated that Jane was afraid to do more than retire discreetly and stand outside the door.

In a few minutes she congratulated herself on the wisdom of not having gone downstairs. She heard a troubled exclamation of wonder, and then a call for herself.

"Jane, please, Jane!"

Lady Walderhurst was still sitting upon the sofa, but she looked pale and unsteady. The letter was in her hand, which rested weakly in her lap. It seemed as if she was so bewildered that she felt helpless.

She spoke in a tired voice.

"Jane," she said, "I think you will have to get me a glass of wine. I don't think I am going to faint, but I do feel so--so upset."

Jane was at her side kneeling by her.

"Please, my lady, lie down," she begged. "Please do."

But she did not lie down. She sat trembling and looking at the girl in a pathetic, puzzled fashion.

"I don't think," she quavered, "that his lordship can have received my letter. He can't have received it. He doesn't say anything. He doesn't say one word--"

She had been too healthy a woman to be subject to attacks of nerves. She had never fainted before in her life, and as she spoke she did not at all understand why Jane seemed to move up and down, and darkness came on suddenly in the middle of the morning.

Jane managed by main strength to keep her from falling from the sofa, and thanked Providence for the power vouchsafed to her. She reached the bell and rang it violently, and hearing it, Mrs. Cupp came upstairs with heavy swiftness.